



THE LIVES OF INDIAN WOMEN: A STUDY INTO PAST AND PRESENT INFLUENCES OF THE BRITISH RULE ON INDIAN WOMEN IN VARIOUS SECTORS AND INDUSTRIES OF MODERN INDIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

In the past, British colonialists had a great influence on various sectors of Indian society and began spreading the ideologies of their empire on the rest of the country to impose their power onto Indians for the sake of their own trade, and expansion of land. Western knowledge & beliefs they felt were lacking in India. The British created laws enforcing Westernization that created an obligation for Indians to follow and also abolished some of India's cultural practices that upheld violence and oppression against women, like sati. Through their influence, the British were able to shape modern Indian society, but they created disparities in women's healthcare, beauty standards, education, and roles and responsibilities—all of which were largely motivated by the caste system or class. This research paper delves into the influence of the British on Indian women and girls in healthcare, beauty standards, education, and roles and responsibilities during the colonial era, exploring how those influences still linger in modern Indian society, carrying on these disparities. This research paper proves that being independent of the colonial rule does not separate the country from its previous impact and influence on modern society and shows how the effects of colonialism still linger in modern Indian society.

KEYWORDS: British Colonization, Caste, Class, Indian, Modern, Women, Girls, Healthcare, Media, Rights, Education, British Raj, Abuse, Patriarchy, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

British Colonialism, the establishment of control and settlement by the British in some parts of the Americas and Asia is of paramount importance in examining Indian history. This control and settlement could be seen in the diversion of cultures, the birth of new laws and policies, shifts in the economy, resource extraction and exploitation, the stripping of cultural artifacts, and many more; all of which made their way into colonized areas of these continents. Much like other foreign influences, British colonialism disproportionately affected the quality of life of Indian women, especially those marginalized, as women were subject to direct violence in various circumstances.

This research paper investigates the ways in which British Colonialism still continues to affect the lives of Indian women concerning various aspects including health, education, rights, and popular culture, even after 75 years of independence. This is not to blame British colonialism for all the retrogression in Indian society but to inform the reader how it catalyzed impacts that still linger in Indian society today. The objective of this research paper is to explore the differences in aspects of Indian society in regard to women's roles during and after colonialism.

Sources & Methods

This research paper will compare past influences of British colonialism on women in sectors and issues including healthcare, education, roles and responsibilities, and beauty standards, compared to how modern India has adopted these influences. Research for this paper will be conducted by collecting secondary information from articles and research papers and finding information on the respective sector/issue in modern India in the same manner. Information from both sources will be synthesized to identify trends that will help reveal how the alterations to women's roles under colonialist influences still persist in modern times.

Literature Review

Several secondary sources were used in the collection of research for this academic paper. India's colonization by the British started and was invigorated due to the greed for raw materials and expansion as well as for gemstones and jewels like the *Koh-i-Noor* diamond, which acted as a symbol of prestige, power, wealth, and colonial superiority, and became a diamond worth killing and fighting for (Boissoneault, 2017). Additionally, to extend their power, the British sought means to connect with the natives and make them of use to their rule by enforcing their own Western ideologies of 'right and wrong' and 'good and bad', against the will of Indians. Colonization also introduced positivistic and predictable laws and repressive and discriminatory measures, including force, to control the natives and prevent anti-British agitation, protests, and armed uprisings in India (Rahman et al, 2018). Their authority helped to destroy dehumanizing cultural practices like *sati* and female infanticide, but promoted patriarchal constructs within society, subjugating many Indian women to violence and domestic work. Of all constructs, the British worsened the effects of casteism and classism in India and provided healthcare facilities and education mainly to upper-class/caste women and hired them in their Company, while lower-caste/class women took part in labor. The increasing effects of caste and class put women in a position of getting abused, and more commonly, women of

lower castes/classes (Buckley, 2015). Those three papers will inform this research paper as they discuss these sectors and issues during the colonial period; this will enable the drawing of a connection between the information and Indian women's and girls' roles in modern India.

Order of Sections

The first section of this research paper will discuss how women's healthcare was impacted and modified during the colonial period in comparison to changes in women's healthcare in modern India. The second section will discuss how the British enforced Eurocentric beauty standards on Indian women, compared to how these standards show in the film and beauty industries. The third section will look at the proliferation of girls' education during the colonial era compared to girls' education in modern India. The final section focuses on the roles and responsibilities of Indian women in society and in marriages in the colonial period compared to modern India. All sections account for the significance of caste and class.

The Connection Between Healthcare & Colonialism

In the 1880s, highly educated men and women in Great Britain decided they would begin extending the power and reliability of their Western healthcare to Indian women. Indian women were at the receiving end of the hypocrisy of colonial powers, having access to 'lock hospitals' where they were treated for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), so British soldiers could have safe pleasure. The British Raj established the 'Dufferin Fund' (the Countess of Dufferin's initiative to fund Indian women's healthcare) to cater only to 'respectable' Indian women (it remains unclear who constituted 'respectable', but it included those affiliated with the elites or those who observed *purdah*) [Forbes, 1994].

In modern Indian society, socioeconomic status and caste tend to coincide; hence, being part of a lower caste puts you in a lower socioeconomic status. This suggests that caste-motivated socioeconomic positions can make Indian women more prone to diseases: "*As women enter adulthood, they are restricted from achieving education and access to quality healthcare services in rural areas. Hence, lack of awareness in rural areas has led women to suffer from a poor and mismanaged healthcare system.*" (Care Health Insurance, 2023). This was evident during the colonial era - women from rural areas and lower castes/classes were restricted from education. Lower-caste individuals such as Dalits were limited to low-status occupations like making brooms and baskets, being sex workers and laborers, etc. Caste discrimination makes it difficult for Dalit women to benefit from social, economic, and civil rights and entitlement, and face challenges regarding poor health, lack of education, poverty, low public and political participation, etc (Thapa et al, 2021).

The British invigorated pre-existing casteism in India and created a healthcare system that followed these principles. The aftermath of these principles is evident when seeing the quality of healthcare Indian women received. It shows the extent to which the British had amplified casteism/classism in healthcare, the effects of which are immanent today.

The Connection Between Popular Culture and Beauty Standards, and Colonialism

In the past, “British colonizers intentionally ascribed fair-skinned Indians to the higher class and caste and the darker Indians to low-class and caste” (Ali, 2021). They imposed a patriarchal culture where social status, education level, and class were dependent on the lightness of the skin (Ali, 2021).

In an ancient context, the Aryans from North India were the dominating caste, with lighter skin in comparison to Dravidians and Dalits who had darker skin and were mainly involved in outdoor manual labor. The British upheld these standards as they associated them with wealth and status, which determined how reputable they were. Having darker skin as a woman meant being inferior to British women. To prevent them from becoming inferior, lighter-skinned women were encouraged not to spend time outside. These beauty standards were imposed on Indian women to be more attractive and achieve high status, something dark-skinned women could not do as their skin was associated with stigma, labor, lower castes, etc (Adamu 2019).

The “Fair is beautiful” doctrine is run by beauty industries, carried by the brand ‘Fair & Lovely’ (a high-profit company, renamed to “Glow & Lovely”) that was promoted as a skin-bleaching product intended to make women lovely by lightening their skin. An advertisement by Fair & Lovely depicted a daughter visibly upset as she heard her father saying “Kaash beta hota” (If only I had a son) because she had a low-income job and was not receiving marriage proposals. Her mother then offered her this cream, enabling her to get promoted, receive marriage proposals, and get rid of her traditional clothes, thereby feeding into the ideals of Eurocentrism (Ali, 2021).

In Bollywood, lighter-skinned women with Eurocentric features are in relatively greater demand than dark-skinned actresses. This shows favoritism towards Eurocentric features and encourages colorism in media. For instance, actress Bhumi Pednekar was hired and painted to have darker skin in the film *Bala*, instead of a dark-skinned actress being hired. This ideology has been motivated by the beliefs of the British Raj (Ali, 2021).

The Connection Between Education & Colonialism

“With Sir Charles Wood's General Education Despatch of 1854 to Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor-General of India, girls' education was recognized by the natives” (Bhattar, 2022). Female education was accessible to Indian girls as they were paid small sums of money per day for attending school or provided free food/clothing to motivate them to go to school. Regardless, education was more open to respectable women than those of lower castes/classes, decreasing employment opportunities.

Though the British encouraged women's education, it was to feed into their interests and increase employment. They would educate boys and girls for employment in various companies to expand them, convert the natives into Christians, and introduce European knowledge. They held that “the teaching of the gospel would ensure that they remained loyal” (Das, 2014).

Presently, female education has improved drastically although with disparities. According to the World Bank, in 2021, female secondary school enrollment was at 76.71% as compared to just 14% in 1971. In addition, the 2009 Right to Education (RTE) Act guaranteed free and compulsory education for all children between the ages of 6-14, enabling girls to go to school more frequently.

Many barriers to girls' education in India still persist; like child marriages, violence, poverty, long distances, expensive schools, norms, lack of sanitary facilities, caste, and class. etc. These barriers prevent progress in girls' education, a pattern that started and was cemented during the colonial era till the present date.

The Connection Between Roles & Responsibilities, and Colonialism

Under British rule, “Women were burdened and confined with patriarchy during the colonial period i.e. colonial and indigenous patriarchy” (Bhattar, 2022). In colonial India, the social statuses of Indian women were reliant on the men they were associated with. This tradition increased their subordination to men in all circumstances and were denied education and refinement opportunities (Stanely and Kumari, 2010).

The British eradicated practices that upheld gender oppression like sati; however, they had an influence on the caste system, making marriage a vehicle for gender-based violence. Through the caste system, Indian men in colonial India were able to freely partake in such abuse, placing women at a lower rank than before colonial rule. The British enumerated and codified caste under their rule as they held the belief that caste was the key to connecting with Indians. They classified people of various castes in levels according to their ability to be of service to them. What was once a custom was formed into law under the Administration. Where the British Raj was successful and right to dismantle practices like *sati*, it failed in freeing women from caste-related oppression. Women were also subjected to housework and forced to meet standards set by men, as encouraged by British women, who were under a patriarchal society themselves (Buckley, 2015).

In marriages even today, many women are expected to move into their in-laws' houses and pay dowry or be perceived negatively. Women's stereotypical roles and responsibilities in marriages today still involve domestic participation, where their sole purpose is to look after the household, cook, clean, and live family-oriented lives, while their husbands go out and care for their financial needs. For many women, domestic work is fulfilling, but for the rest, it is forced upon them. Women are also subjected to domestic abuse in marriages, with nearly 31,000 complaints of crimes committed against women received by the National Commission for Women (NCW) in 2022 (Press Trust of India, 2023). Often, violence against women from lower classes goes unreported; around 50% disproportionately suffer from caste oppression and gender-based violence. Despite this, many women have been able to distinguish themselves as teachers, receptionists, nurses, doctors, air hostesses, etc.

Overall, we can see how the Raj's influence on women's roles and the caste system has fueled the patriarchal marriages and society in modern India, placing women at high risk of violence and abuse in marriages and as a result of caste, just as they were during the colonial era.

Rebuttal

This research paper has found that the effects of British colonialism still linger in modern Indian society and affect the lives of Indian women and girls in regard to education, healthcare, beauty standards, and roles and responsibilities. These effects are still evident today, but some arguments may suggest that the unprogressive elements of modern Indian society should be attributed to the natives and not the British, who rather improved India. However, although the research paper is not holding the British accountable for history, it is necessary to recognize that issues regarding class and caste (which were discussed in the paper) existed before colonization but were amplified during the colonial era as the British imposed their own ideologies, systems, standards, laws in India. These were against the will of the Indians, which the natives were obligated to follow and continue to do so due to the great social impact of these influences.

Conclusion

Despite these arguments, the main conclusion derived from this research is that the influence of British colonialism on Indian women still lingers in modern Indian society and continues to have an impact on the country and on individuals' lives. It can be concluded that British interference and amplification of caste and class was extensive, which is why these constructs are deciding factors of daily lives. Indian women have adapted to the systems and standards of the British, that it has become a normal part of their routine, and analyzing the effects of colonialism on Indian women is necessary in tackling disparities and discrimination based on gender, to create an equitable Indian society.

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